



Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Veterans: An Analysis of Poems About PTSD

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how veterans use poetry as a means of escape from their PTSD, and how it helps them to cope with their trauma. I first describe what PTSD is and the severity of this condition in veterans. Secondly, I analyze and summarize four poems that give more insight to how a veteran copes with PTSD and how they see life post-war. Finally, I give an overall outlook about why veterans use poetry and how it is a beneficial tool for combating PTSD. This paper demonstrates how veterans share their voices by using poetry to escape the pain and suffering that PTSD can bring and ultimately find a sense of peace and comfort.

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“The effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be devastating for veterans returning from war. PTSD can manifest in various forms of physical and psychological distress, including flashbacks, nightmares, and depression” (Manderson, 2021, para. 2). While traditional forms of therapy are available to veterans, many find solace and expression through writing poetry. PTSD can be a debilitating condition, but writing poetry can provide veterans with an outlet to express their experiences and emotions. Through writing poetry, veterans can create a safe space to reflect on their experiences while also finding a sense of relief and catharsis. This paper explores how veterans use poetry as a means of escape from their PTSD, and how it helps them to cope with their trauma. I first describe what PTSD is and the severity of this condition in veterans. Secondly, I analyze and summarize four poems that give more insight to how a veteran copes with PTSD and how they see life post-war. Finally, I give an overall outlook about why veterans use poetry and how it is a beneficial tool for combating PTSD. This paper demonstrates how veterans share their voices by poetry to escape the pain and suffering that PTSD can bring and ultimately find a sense of peace and comfort.

WHAT IS PTSD?

“Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event, either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms of PTSD may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the event” (Manderson, 2021, para. 17). Chris Brewin (2007) explained that PTSD cannot be described through a basic conditioning model, as this disorder is much more complex and involves a heavy amount of trauma. According to Brewin, “A consideration of risk factors implicates the experience of being ‘overwhelmed’ at the time of the trauma, accompanied by possible downregulation of the prefrontal cortex” (para. 1). The essence of Brewin’s argument is that in order to meet the criteria for PTSD, one must experience several risk factors that cause them to be extremely overwhelmed, therefore, leading to disruptions in the prefrontal cortex.

Veterans are at an increased risk of developing PTSD due to the traumatic events they may have experienced while serving in the military. Combat veterans may be more likely to develop PTSD due to the intensity of their military experiences (Keane et al., 1987). For veterans, PTSD symptoms may be especially intense due to the unique circumstances of their service. Common symptoms experienced by veterans include flashbacks, difficulty sleeping, anger, hypervigilance, and survivor’s guilt. Treatment for PTSD can include talk therapy, medication,

and alternative therapies such as yoga and mindfulness. PTSD is a disorder that continues to harm and intrude the lives of veterans; however, there are different forms of expression that veterans use in order to share their voices.

POEMS BY VETERANS’

In the poem *PTSD* by Chantelle Bateman (2021), the writer expresses the emotional and physical toll of living with PTSD. Chantelle Bateman is a veteran from the Iraq war in 2005. She is now a mother, writer, and visual artist, but continues to struggle with PTSD. She had met other veterans that use art as a tool for coping and helping through the feelings of PTSD. Bateman continues to work for support services towards healing and justice as she shares her art in hopes to help other veterans or by educating the public on veterans with experiencing PTSD.

In Bateman’s (2021) poem, *PTSD*, she shares the feeling of being overwhelmed, of being unable to escape the painful memories, of constantly being on guard, and of struggling to cope with the physical symptoms. The poet expresses a sense of alienation, feeling isolated and alone in their struggles, even when in the midst of a crowd. They feel like their PTSD is a heavy burden, weighing them down and preventing them from living a normal life. The poem then turns to the physical effects of the disorder, describing how the poet’s body is constantly in a state of tension, with their heart racing, their breathing shallow, and their muscles tight. In Bateman’s view, “It’s the sound that I don’t want anyone to hear, creeping out of my pillows in the morning, before the coffee and cigarettes begin” (lines 4–6). Bateman is trying to convey the reader to feel what she feels when she wakes up. The poem then shifts to the emotional effects of PTSD, with the poet feeling numb and unable to connect with the world around them. They feel disconnected and isolated, as if they are living in a different world than everyone else. It speaks to the physical and emotional challenges of the disorder, as well as the sense of alienation and isolation it can bring. The poem is an honest and poignant look into the life of a veteran living with PTSD. It conveys a sense of resilience and hope that, despite the struggles, veterans can come home and heal from their journey. This healing comes from reflecting war and the experiences these veterans went through and how they lived.

Rachel Galvin (2017) expresses the emotional toll that the aftermath of war has in her poem, *After the War*. Galvin is a scholar and poet that specializes in comparative poetry based in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some of her research includes wartime literature in which her poem, *After the War*, is a great piece to reflect on a poet writing about the aftereffects of war.

In this poem Galvin describes a world that is no longer filled with the roar of battle, but instead is filled with emptiness and the constant thoughts of what a veteran has done and what has happened. Galvin (2017) writes, “But after the war he took up photography, why not, and shot beautiful women for years. Got pretty good at it, and how” (lines 10–12). In making this comment, Galvin shows that the veteran is foreshadowing war tactics of “shooting” to his current profession of photography. However, *After the War* continues to repeat itself, just as the veteran’s mind repeats, day after day, the same memories and experiences from war. In a way, Galvin reflects on the hope that is inherent in this environment, the hope that peace may someday return. She implores the reader to remember the war and its destruction, but also to remember the beauty that has reemerged in its wake. *After the War* relates to PTSD in its exploration of the lasting effects of war on a veteran’s mental health. It reflects the feelings of being haunted by memories of the past, and how it can be difficult to move on from the trauma of war. This poem speaks to the inner turmoil and struggles that veteran’s with PTSD often experience, and how this can make it difficult to move forward, even after the war is over. *After the War* is significant in showing how poetry is used to help veterans through their struggles of experiencing PTSD because Galvin writes this poem in hopes that a veteran reading realizes that there is hope after war.

The poem *PTSD (Please Try Something Different)* by Jeremy Stainthorp Berggren (2021) is a reflection on the emotions associated with the mental health condition of PTSD. According to his biography on Warrior Writers, Jeremy Berggren is a veteran from the Marine Corps who served from 1998–2006. He uses poetry and other forms of art to talk about his experiences, which convey themes of “military suicide” (Berggren, 2021, para. 3). While in the field, a Marine in his unit died by suicide; Berggren expressed that he wanted to share something relevant as “numbers of veteran and service member suicides” (Berggren, 2021, para. 3) continue to increase.

In his poem, Berggren (2021) communicates the idea that PTSD can be a debilitating condition that can be difficult to overcome, but ultimately suggests that it is possible to break free from the negative effects of the disorder. The poem begins by describing the feeling of being trapped in a world of fear and despair caused by PTSD. The narrator conveys the sense of being overwhelmed by the condition and feeling as though their life is no longer their own: “Post-Traumatic--Stress—Disorder—But can you—Please—Try—Seeing—Death—And then have nothing go wrong—Because you—People—Triggered a—Social—Disease—Because you don’t hear shit—After we come home” (lines 18–34). In other words, Berggren is trying to reach his audience and,

in a way, wake them up to see a reality from a different perspective. Although veterans who have PTSD may seem to concern to only a small group of people, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about mental health and preventing suicide. Berggren is not only able to share his experiences, but can help educate the public on military suicide, and poetry is one way to do that. The poem then goes on to suggest that, despite the difficulties of PTSD, it is possible to strive for something better. In multiple, repeated lines the narrator pleads readers to “please try something different” (lines 94–97, lines 100–103, lines 106–109, etc.). The narrator suggests that by taking a different approach, it is possible to break free from the negative emotions associated with the disorder. As Berggren did, he tried poetry as his “something different,” which in turn helped him through the healing process of PTSD.

Suzanne Rancourt is like Jeremy Berggren, in that she also served in the Marine Corps as well as the Army. She has used poetry and other literary works to express how war played a large role in her mental health. Rancourt’s poem *Tsunami Conflict* (2012) is a powerful reflection on the psychological toll of war. It speaks to the confusion of emotions that veterans often experience: a mixture of sadness, guilt, anger, and confusion. For example, Rancourt writes, “an old man—an old woman—the soldier—the shell— children—gains—losses washing across beaches, his thumb still in the shell” (lines 15–19). The poem speaks to the idea of the tsunami of emotions that veterans often experience, and it speaks to the idea that war can be both a physical and psychological conflict. The poem’s imagery of a tsunami of emotions crashing over the veteran is a powerful metaphor for the overwhelming feelings of fear, anger, and guilt that can consume the mind of a veteran and lead to PTSD. Reading Rancourt’s poem can help us as civilians recognize that coming back to a place we call home can be unrecognizable and new to veterans. *Tsunami Conflict* by Suzanne S. Rancourt (2012) speaks to the experience of PTSD in a powerful and emotive way. Through vivid imagery, the poem captures the feeling of being overwhelmed by the turbulence that comes with PTSD. The poem conveys the idea that PTSD can be a powerful force that can take hold of a veteran’s life and can be difficult to escape from. In this way, poetry has helped Rancourt express her experiences as a veteran while educating her readers about the effects of PTSD post-war.

COUNTERARGUMENT

While poetry can be a powerful tool for helping veterans cope with PTSD, it is not a substitute for professional medical help. Many veterans suffering from PTSD require

more intensive treatments, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and medications, to effectively manage their symptoms. Additionally, some veterans may find it difficult to adequately express their feelings through poetry, or may not find the activity to be helpful. For these reasons, it is important that veterans seek professional medical help in addition to using poetry to cope with their PTSD.

Poems can be used by veterans to help cope with PTSD in a variety of ways. Writing poetry can be a powerful tool for veterans to express their feelings in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way. Reading poetry can help veterans to connect with their emotions and to understand themselves better. Poetry can also be used to create a sense of community and support among veterans, as they can share their experiences with each other through their writing. Additionally, veterans can use poetry to express gratitude for the support they receive from friends, family, and fellow veterans. Finally, poetry can provide a safe space for veterans to explore their feelings and understand their PTSD better. This is just one form of art that veterans use to help them ease any pain that they are carrying from war.

HOW IS POETRY BENEFICIAL?

Veterans often use poetry as a form of therapy to express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences related to their service. Writing or reading poetry can be a powerful aid in healing from PTSD. Poetry can help process and express difficult experiences, provide a vehicle for self-expression, and enable veterans to connect with and understand the feelings of others. Dale Tracy (2021), professor at Royal Military College, claimed, “Research shows the positive effects of creative self-expression and, specifically, poetry therapy for veterans, including veterans experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder” (para. 2). Writing poems are an effective way to learn coping strategies and gain insights into one’s own healing process. Poetry’s structure and form can also help veterans to focus and organize their thoughts, which may provide an easier way to communicate and process feelings in comparison to talking. Additionally, reading and writing poetry can be used as a creative outlet to help veterans cope with the emotional, physical, and psychological pain associated with PTSD. As the analysis of the poems by Chantelle Bateman, Rachel Galvin, Jeremy Berggren, and Suzanne Rancourt in this paper showed, poetry can be used to help veterans heal through the detrimental effects of PTSD. Veterans Bateman, Galvin, Berggren, and Rancourt have all created poems of hope and educated the public on how war has negatively affected the lives of millions of veterans.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

My name is Amber Pope and I am a fourth year student at the University of California, Irvine where I am pursuing a degree in Psychology. My personal hobbies include painting, taking photos, and merchandising. I enjoy being creative and exploring different forms of art so poems are a great analysis for me. After my undergrad studies I plan to either grow my career in the merchandising field and interior design or attend graduate school in hopes of becoming a forensic psychologist.

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